

Cry Havoc! The Crooked Road to the Civil War, 1861

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Review

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Lankford, Nelson D. *Cry Havoc! The Crooked Road to the Civil War, 1861.* Viking Press, \$27.95 hardcover ISBN 9780670038213

Chronicling the Secession Winter

Civil war histories come either in very long books, even series of volumes covering many years dealing with large topics such as slavery or economic development or some that cover only a year in great detail. In this book, Nelson Lankford, the genial editor of *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, concentrates on the three months after Lincoln's inauguration. It is micro history at its best, but political in the most traditional sense. I would say to this audience that the best word to describe this book is that it is fun. Lankford—who I have to say is a respected friend—would probably want me to say it is well researched, intelligent, and well written. It is all of these, but it is fun for an historian of the subject to read.

While the book includes details and vivid descriptions, its basic story treats events that most of us know, but which are often left out of general studies. While he avoids tall tales of an alternative history of the United States, he emphasizes the decisions of individual men and groups. He emphasizes contingency and that even at this late date in the spring of 1861 things might have gone another way. His focus is on the Unionists in the upper South, particularly Virginia. Why did it take the Old Dominion so long to secede? While most of the book is on events in Virginia, Lankford also balances this with the equally important matter of why Maryland did not secede.

The devil is in the details Lankford lays out and is not easily summarized. It is ultimately a story of the wavering of these Unionists, who were like most nineteenth century Americans localists at heart, and the Olan of the secessionists. While men as cosmopolitan and seemingly nationalist as Robert E. Lee went with their states, there also was a sense that there was a South. Lankford does not really analyze this or even talk about it much, but it comes through in

wonderfully chosen quotations. Although he has included many examples from northern newspapers and politicians, his evocation of the ambiguity he often uses the word atavistic of actions of the Unionists in the upper South, calls for a new study of attitudes in the North, which was perhaps even more divided by sectionalism and ethnic and class conflict. Certainly a state like Illinois with Lincoln and Douglas, Chicago and Cairo, was nearly as conflicted as Virginia. In fact this northern state extends in latitude to the southern border of Virginia. The tide of patriotism that Lankford correctly sees cresting at this time had receded by 1862 in the face of war. There is no need for Lankford to go into this, but the Copperheads and Peace Democrats need the kind of detailed study that Lankford here gives to the struggling Unionists in the upper South.

Perhaps the best chapter is that one on the momentarily isolated Washington in mid-April. Because of the pace of the book, Washington is under siege. This appears in excellent books by the likes of James McPherson and Russell Weigley, but it gets only a page or two. Lankford give us a tense and dramatic chapter, which clearly illustrates the revolutionary and thus conflicted nature of what was happening in just a few days.

Daniel Crofts wrote a wonderful book about the upper South that hinted at some of this. Frank Towers has also given us a great study of Maryland. Lankford goes beyond what we get from these and older excellent books in his daily comments on the Virginia convention, the secessionist attacks on Harpers Ferry and Gosport, and the riots in Baltimore. Lankford's discussion of the burning of the bridges is a masterful analogy. He gives us a sense of what a revolutionary situation was like in the eyes of the participants.

Lankford's intent is to show how little things really are important in any big historical event. These great things are not made of world historical movements, but the decisions of very small people. He rehearses obscure events that most of the people reading this journal are aware of, but he uses them collectively in a new way.

So where do we go from here? The Unionists were weak and the advocates of state rights and localism were strong. Until the war, the United States was not really a modern nation. James K Polk called it a confederacy of independent republics. In very telling detail, Lankford has opened up many questions about how modern the United States was at the time. In going into such detail, he makes real what our Civil War was about. I do not mean the actual questions at

stake, about which we still try rather unsuccessfully to balance, but the human drama involved.

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